

Data Limitations

Data in this report are based on a sample of consumer units and may differ somewhat from the data that would be obtained in a complete census of consumer units. The variability of sample estimates is a function of sample design and sample size and generally decreases with larger size samples and aggregation over product categories. Expenditure estimates for broader expenditure groups and larger population groups will generally be subject to smaller sampling variation than expenditure estimates for narrower expenditure and population subgroups. The coefficient of variation (CV), expressing the standard deviation as a percentage of the sample estimate, is a commonly used measure for comparing the relative variability of sample estimates. CVs for the various detailed estimates of annual per person food expenditures presented in this report for the total urban population are shown in table 24.

The estimates are also subject to sampling biases that may result from the selection of households, the recording of information, and the interpretation of information. The long and extensive experience of BLS in conducting surveys of this type, however, helps to minimize these sampling biases.

Another source of bias stems from identifying and handling incomplete questionnaires. Identifying incomplete expenditure reporting is particularly difficult in the CE diary because respondents are required to report only items actually purchased. No action is required on items not purchased during the survey. Distinguishing between an incomplete expenditure diary and one in which the respondent records only a few purchases is difficult. Incomplete reporting on other sections of the survey may be associated with incomplete expenditure diaries. For example, homeowners not reporting a mortgage status are about half as likely to report purchases for most food items as those homeowners reporting a mortgage status. Hence, caution must be exercised when attempting to draw conclusions based on the information in the tables.